DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 685 CS 212 972

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TITLE Combining the Personal and Analytical: Assignments for Basic Writing.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Writing; Higher Education; Literary Criticism; Personal Narratives; *Writing Assignments; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Academic Discourse; *Writing Development

ABSTRACT

The traditional basic writing model (giving students manageable writing tasks like narratives and descriptions of familiar places) has been criticized by both Mike Rose and David Bartholomae, among others, for not moving the basic writer far enough toward the goal of academic writing competence. Rose's schemata are reassuring and helpful to basic writers, but the assignments are remote from their immediate concerns. Bartholomae's use of personal experience as the basis on which to build generalizations and theories are more appealing to basic writers, but the assignments lack explicit procedures that can be followed as they perform the complex tasks required by writing in the academic world. Two assignments synthesize the approaches of Rose and Bartholomae. In the first assignment, students are asked to categorize papers they and their classmates have written about personal experiences and then to discuss a single category, comparing and contrasting the papers within it. The second assignment asks students to identify a problematic situation in a book, and form that problematic situation into a problem statement, which contains the clashing elements of the problem and a question whose answer will resolve the problem. Students then go on to investigate possible answers, using the text as evidence. (RS)

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Combining the Personal And Analytical: Assignments For Basic Writing

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Introduction

Basic Writing Courses generally take as their goal bridging the gap between the basic writers' limited writing experience and the challenges of writing in the academic world. Traditional Basic Writing Courses tended to focus on their students' starting points, making students comfortable in the writing class by giving them manageable writing tasks, like narratives and descriptions of familiar places. A typical assignment is described as follows: "there is no more successful assignment for beginning writers than the 1 paragraph description of the classroom at one moment in time" (English 4 Basic Writing Skills Resource Book for Instructors, English Department, Penn State University, 1977, I, 2; III, 12). The paragraph was the appropriate unit of construction, one that would not overwhelm the basic writer; in fact, whole textbooks were built around this unit: for instance, the text, Writing Clear Paragraphs.

Alternate Approaches To Basic Writing -- Rose and Bartholomae

This traditional Basic Writing model has been critiqued by both Mike Rose and David Bartholomae, among others, for not moving the Basic Writer far enough toward the goal of academic writing competence. In his well-known article, "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal," Mike Rose argues that instead of starting with the simple, personal writing that appears nowhere else in the university, remedial students should, right from the start, do the kind of writing in their composition courses that would be expected of them in other college courses. This "academic" writing he characterizes as challenging and complex and possessing the following attributes:

1. It is based on others' materials (lectures, readings, texts), not on the writer's own life and ideas. According to Rose, "few academic assignments . . . require students to produce material ex nihil; she is almost always writing about, from, or through others' materials" (119).

2. It takes the form either of exposition or what Rose calls "academic argument . . . a calculated marshalling of information, a sort of exposition aimed at persuading" (111).

3. It requires students to do more than regurgitate or retell information (what Scardamalia and Bereiter call "knowledge telling," that is, writing down content in largely the same manner in which it was stored in the memory [13]). Instead students are asked "to select and order information, and to see and re-see data and events in various contexts" (Rose, 111).

4. It relies on certain organizational patterns--definition, seriation, classification, comparison/contrast. These "discourse structures or schematas," as Rose calls them, can serve both as structures of and strategies for writing (120-123).

And Rose designs assignments like the following to explicitly teach students these schematas: for seriation, he asks students to arrange correctly a scrambled set of the steps in the reduplication process of a virus and write a paper "detailing the accurate sequence of process steps" (125); for classification, he asks students to observe slides of unidentified paintings of the human body, and write a paper which presents and illustrates your own classification system for these paintings (125).

Like Rose, Bartholomae finds the traditional Basic Writing model inadequate. In the article, "Teaching Ourselves To Teach Basic Writing," he characterizes teachers who only assign simple, personal writing to remedial students ("describe people and scenes, tell stories about themselves,") as showing "contempt" for them (10). Bartholomae also argues for assigning students challenging, academic tasks that give them the opportunity to "develop new stances toward the world, new ways of ordering and controlling their experience" (10). To enable them to do this, Bartholomae suggests a progression of assignments that starts directly in students' own experience and moves along Moffett's sequence, from "recording," where one tells what is happening and "reporting" where one

narrates, tells what has happened; to the higher abstraction levels of "exposition" where one generalizes about what happens and "argument" where one theorizes about what may happen (Moffett, 35). And, indeed, in the Basic Reading and Writing course Bartholomae describes in Facts, Counterfacts and Artifacts, the assignments move in just that way: students start by writing stories about themselves, "describing moments when they changed or didn't change . . ."; then, "on the basis of this work, they are asked to draw conclusions about what change is as it is represented in the stories they have told" (31-32). Finally, these stories become "the primary materials" for theory papers on adolescent development (31-32).

While both Rose and Bartholomae attempt to meet Basic Writers at the place where they are and move them along toward competence in academic writing, they work in different ways. Rose's approach is primarily intellectual. He believes that the academic world is intrinsically interesting to students and offers them the schemata as "investigative tools . . . for examining the academic environment itself" (123). The subjects that his students work with in using these schemata (the process of a virus, characteristics of paintings) are distant and impersonal. Bartholomae engages students more fully in the writing by having them take personal experience as their subject--first narrating, then analyzing and theorizing about it. As Rose himself observes, Bartholomae's curriculum "weaves academic writing into students' reflections on . . . their coming of age and requires them to turn an analytic eye onto their own and other's autobiographies" (123). However, while Bartholomae is asking students to do complex, academic tasks, he does not give them explicit instruction in specific strategies for doing these tasks as Rose does.

My Synthesis: Two Assignments

My assignments take something from both Rose and Bartholomae. Following Rose, I give students explicit schemata--specific procedures--to facilitate their movement into

academic writing. My students, first-generation college students at a two year campus need and welcome these supports. Following Bartholomae, my assignments ask students to write about experience--their own, their classmates', that presented in literature. My students like this personal connection; they find it hard to get interested in subjects that have, in the words of one young woman, "nothing to do with me." In my first assignment, students are asked to categorize papers they wrote about personal experience and then to discuss a single category, comparing and contrasting the papers within it. The second assignment asks students to raise a question about a work of fiction and then go on to investigate possible answers, using the text as evidence.

Assignment 1: Categorizing Personal Experience

As in the Bartholomae sequence, my students are first asked to tell the story of a meaningful experience in their recent past. Then all eighteen of these written narratives are duplicated and distributed to the whole class. Students are now asked to consider these descriptions of the experiences of their classmates as evidence of the kinds of things that happen to young adults and to make some sense of this data. They are asked to look for commonalities among the stories. To assist in the sorting process, I give them what Rose would call a "schema." In this case, the schema is "categorizing"--sorting data according to common elements and labelling the various groupings that result--akin to Rose's "classification." Students categorize the data twice and, to assist in this, are given each time a chart with five columns and space for a heading for each of the columns. In the first, "macro" categorizing phase, they sort all the papers into groups that seem to belong together and then give a name to the common element in the heading. For instance, one student noticed that several papers dealt with accomplishments, some others with problems, and a third group with relationships. These common elements became headings for columns in his chart with relevant papers listed below. (Some of these charts are put on

the blackboard for the whole class to see.) In the second or "micro categorizing" phase, students took a subset of the papers, a single column of their first chart and looked for commonalities within it. For instance, looking at the papers in the category named "accomplishment," (above), the student was able to identify new commonalities which became a new set of categories: "obstacles," "feelings about the obstacles," "determination to overcome obstacles," and "proving to someone they could do what they set out to do." In the column under each of the four headings on his chart, the writer then entered the evidence (quotations and incidents) from the text that illustrated that idea.

Once the second chart was filled in, the final phase was to write the paper, comparing and contrasting the way the stories illustrated the particular points. Students wrote the paper from the second, not the first, chart because the first chart contained so many more papers to work with (18) than the second (3-4) and because the more "gross" distinctions of the first didn't lend themselves as well to subtle, in-depth discussion as did the finer distinctions of the second. As they put their ideas into connected sentences and paragraphs (essay form), students are fulfilling Rose's requirements for a challenging academic task. One, they are working from the materials of others, not purely from their own heads; in addition, their own paper is now a piece of evidence for a larger point they want to make--not just the spilling out of their own experience on the page. Two, they are doing a typical academic task-- what Rose calls "academic argument," i.e., supporting a point by using evidence. For instance, to make the point that "each author experienced obstacles before achieving the feeling of pride," the writer cited evidence from the paper, "The Talking Bird": "The author of 'Talking Bird' had to conquer the negative output from her family. She also had to be very patient with the bird itself." Three, they are re-ordering/re-seeing data when they took parts of the stories and re-arrange them to make a new structure. Finally, in their conclusions some students, without being instructed to by the teacher,

went on to articulate a commonality among the papers that stood out for them. For instance, in the paper titled "Decisions," after discussing "new environments," "different ways of handling problems," and "new directions," the writer identified in her final paragraph a new link among the writers of the stories: "they all possess one common element. They are all survivors. Each took charge of his or her life and is moving in a positive new direction." Note that the classification schemata (the chart) helps students learn to perform analysis of texts. In addition, they gain personal insight from the activity because they are working with texts about their own and their classmates' experiences.

Assignment 2: Analyzing Problems in Literature

My second assignment moves students one sep further along the route to competence in academic writing. While they are still "Reporting, the narrative of what happened," (Moffett, 47), they are moving outward from personal experience, what Moffett calls "autobiography" (47) to fiction. This time they are writing not about the experience of people they know, but about a literary text--the product of the imaginings of an author, shaped to create an effect. At the same time, the content, while more distanced from them, still represents human experience and as such (in the words of Robert Coles, The Call of Stories) has "the immediacy a story can possess as it connects so persuasively with human experience" (204-205). In particular, the novels by Anne Tyler that students worked with (A Slipping Down Life, Earthly Possessions) were chosen for their accessibility to my students; both concern (not the world of the rich and famous in exotic places) but ordinary people, with the problems of everyday life in late twentieth century America. In both, young characters, (Drum and Eve in A Slipping-Down Life, Mindy and Jake in Earthly Possessions) search for a direction in life and experience conflict with the adult world.

This time the schema (the strategy to assist students in thinking and shaping the material) is an adaptation of Young, Becker and Pike's problem analysis, a systematic

procedure for finding, stating, and exploring problems. The student first learns to identify a problematic situation: a time "when [a person] notices that his acts or the acts of others clash with his values, when he discovers something in the nature of the world that doesn't 'fit' his conception of it, when he has a desire or a need that he finds he cannot fulfil . . . ." (Young, Becker and Pike, 90). She next learns to form that problematic situation into a problem statement, which contains the clashing elements of the problem and a question whose answer will resolve the problem (92). Finally, the student comes up with possible answers to his question (hypotheses), and then tests and evaluates them.

In my assignment, students apply problem analysis, as Rose suggests, not to personal experience but to a text, one of the Anne Tyler novels named above. First, students look for problematic situations in the book, aspects that puzzle or surprise them, that conflict with their expectations. Here's a problematic situation that one student found in Earthy Possessions: "One thing I thought about while reading the book was that if I was held hostage by someone, I know if I had opportunities to get away, I would. I just couldn't understand why Charlotte stayed with Jake." A student reading Slipping Down Life was surprised that Evie stayed interested in Drum even after she learned that "Drum isn't the nice, loving man she dreamt he would be."

Second, these students formed their feelings of puzzlement into the following problem statements:

A. I'd expect a hostage to take advantage of every opportunity to escape.

B. Yet Charlotte, taken hostage by Jake, doesn't try to escape even though she has many opportunities to do so.

? Why doesn't Charlotte try harder to escape?

A. I'd expect Evie to lose interest in Drum once she learned that he wasn't the nice, loving man she had dreamt he would be.

B. Yet she stays interested in Drum and eventually marries him.

? Why does Evie stay interested in Drum in spite of his defects?

Third, the students evaluated their question by considering if it was about a major issue in the book, if there was enough evidence in the book to discuss it, and if he/she was interested in writing about it. If the question did not meet these criteria, students had to find another one. Fourth, students came up with possible answers (hypotheses) to their chosen question and tested these out by finding evidence in the text to support (or refute) them--performing, in this last step, what Rose would call, "academic argument".

To answer the question of why Charlotte didn't try harder to escape, the writer came up with these hypotheses:

1. because she was planning on leaving home in the first place
2. because Jake had a gun and might kill her if she tried to get away
3. because she felt she needed to help Jake out, especially with Mindy
4. because she wasn't needed anymore at home, so she decided to stay with Jake

To answer the question of why Evie stayed interested in Drum, the student came up with these hypotheses:

1. Evie doesn't speak up while Drum does
2. Evie wants to have a family like Drum's
3. Evie needs a mother and through Drum she can get one
4. Evie doesn't know what she wants out of life, but Drum does
5. Evie never had a serious relationship with a boy before

Fifth, the students tested their hypotheses by looking for evidence in the books to support (or refute) them. As evidence for the hypothesis that Charlotte "needed to help Jake out with Mindy," the writer cited the incident in the book where Charlotte tried to cheer Mindy up when she had lost her cat by getting her a balloon (Earthly Possessions,

147). As evidence for the hypothesis that Evie "never had a serious relationship with a boy," the writer quoted this description by Evie of her social life: "Why, I never was on a date, even, except with that peculiar Buddy Howland whose voice never changed . . ." (A Slipping-Down Life, 113). In their conclusions, students were encouraged to evaluate their hypotheses, to compare them with one another. Note this judgment by the writer of the paper on Charlotte: "I think the fourth reason which states that she didn't escape because she wasn't needed at home anymore is the most important." In her conclusion, the writer of the paper about Evie put all her hypotheses together to come up with a new, larger insight into Evie's character:

> All of these examples kept Evie interested in Drum. I think it wasn't Drum she was interested in but what he could give her. He could give her the family she never had, the mother she always longed for, a life goal she could share, the self-esteem she needed, and last but not least, a husband who (she thought) would give her what she never had: love and companionship.

While Rose does use literature as part of one of his assignments, he uses it differently than I do. For example, he uses Bartholomae's story--"Game"--not as a source of problematic elements that students perceive and explore, but to test a theory that he provides for them, "the environmental etiology of insanity" (126). Also, the literature he chooses--"(a story of two deranged soldiers locked indefinitely in a missile bunker)" is much more distanced from students' experience than are the Tyler novels. Also, the process of problem analysis that students use, though involving complex intellectual skills, is not very different from the natural process of raising and answering questions that they use in understanding the world around them in everyday life. The difference is that in my assignment, they are being asked to consciously apply the procedure to an academic task.

Conclusion

Although they are interested in getting a college education, my students don't find all academic pursuits intrinsically interesting. They would most likely find Rose's assignments remote from their immediate concerns. Bartholomae's use of personal experience as the basis on which to build generalizations and theories would be more appealing to them. At the same time, my students find schemata, like the ones Rose offers, reassuring and helpful. For, these concrete actions make explicit the procedures they can follow as they perform the complex tasks required by writing in the academic world.

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